

## The Accidental Adventure of *Bubalus Bubalis*

*Bubalus bubalis* is an Asian water buffalo who now happily lives on an East Texas ranch. When not eating grass with a bunch of horses and cows, he can be found alone in the middle of the pasture, soaking in a pond, munching on chocolate bars. The two sisters who own the ranch call him “Doc.” Neighboring ranchers frowned when “Doc” first showed up, but finding him to be meek and unpretentious, and distantly related to the American bison, they eventually accepted him. Whenever the sisters share the story of “Doc,” the cowboys chuckle and tip their hats.

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*Bubalus bubalis* lived the first ten years of his life in Palawan, one of the more than seven thousand islands in the Philippines. There he was known as carabao or *kalabaw*. He belonged to a rice farmer named Kiko and his family. He was their tractor, taxi, pet, and best friend.

One day, Kiko’s niece who had immigrated to America, came back to the island for a short visit. Kiko and his eldest child, Ligaya, rode *Kalabaw* to the ferry landing to welcome her. As the niece climbed on the cart hitched to *Kalabaw*, she told Kiko,

“If Ligaya goes to America, she can earn enough there to buy you a horse. You won’t need this slowpoke.”

*Kalabaw* cringed at the slur, but he felt better when Kiko said, “My carabao may be slow but he gets things done.”

And Ligaya said, “*Itay* can’t plow this *bukid* without Bubaloo’s help.”

“When you’re in America, earning dollars,” the cousin argued, “you can afford to buy him a horse and a tractor.”

“Tractors need gas to run. My *kalabaw* doesn’t,” Kiko said as he proudly rode on his animal’s back. “But it would be nice to have a tractor.”

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At last they made it to the house. As the ladies jumped off the cart, Kiko's nine other kids ran out of the house to welcome the cousin and her *pasalubong*. Before joining them, Ligaya thanked *Kalabaw*. Kiko also thanked him before unhitching the cart and unloading the luggage. *Kalabaw* was now free to slip into his favorite mud hole and relax.

A breeze coming in from the nearby sea, and a *maya* singing on a guava tree, kept him company while he wallowed in the cool, muddy water. *America*. All Ligaya's cousin talked about was America. Would she be able to persuade Ligaya into going to America? Of all of Kiko's kids, Ligaya loved him the most. If she should leave, he wanted to go with her. But are carabaos like him welcome in America?

Since the hard work of plowing the rice field for planting was still weeks away, *Kalabaw* had some free time to carry the cousins around, mostly to Ligaya's favorite place—the seashore. At the beach, one day, the ladies had a picnic. Ligaya spread a blanket on the white sand, where she placed everything that was inside her picnic basket: *Puto and kutsinta*, fried *saging na saba*, fresh *lumpia*, coconut water, and some goodies from America.

“*Ang sarap-sarap*,” Ligaya said, eating something dark as mud. “*Salamat*, Cousin. We have chocolate here, too, but it's so expensive. Will you send me some more when you get back to America?”

“Well,” said the cousin, “if you come with me, you can eat chocolate every day.”

Ligaya laughed.

Watching the cousins wolf down one chocolate bar after another, *Kalabaw*'s mouth started to water. He licked his chops, longing for a bite. Ligaya got up to give him a piece, but the cousin stopped her.

“Don't waste it on that beast! He only eats grass!” she shouted. “Let's go swimming.”

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*What a buwisit!* *Kalabaw* wished this cousin had never come back for a visit.

As the girls raced each other to the water, an unexpected gust of wind blew the blanket onto *Kalabaw's* head. After shaking his head vigorously, he finally rid himself of it. When he looked down, he saw chocolate bars scattered all over the sand! He'd never take one from the blanket, but now that they were on the ground, it would be a shame to let them go to waste. He ate one, then another, and soon, they were all gone. *Ang sarap-sarap!*

He was licking his chops when the cousins returned from their swim.

"What happened here? Where are the chocolate bars?" the cousin asked. "We didn't eat all of them, did we?"

Just then, *Kalabaw* burped.

"Aha!" cried the cousin, sniffing his breath. "*Amoy chocolate ka!*"

"What?" Ligaya said. "Didn't you say Bubaloo only eats grass?"

"Explain this then." The cousin held up the piece of candy wrapper she had yanked out of *Kalabaw's* mouth. "*Magnanakaw! Matakaw!*"

"Cousin, please, don't call him names, *naman.*" Then Ligaya turned to *Kalabaw*.

"Bubaloo, did you really eat all the chocolate?"

The answer was another loud burp. "*Naku*, Bubaloo, I hope you won't get sick."

"I hope that thief does get sick!" said the cousin. "It will teach him a lesson."

*Kalabaw* didn't get sick. In fact, from then on, all he could think about was having more chocolate.

At the end of the week, while Ligaya was washing the mud off him, she said,

"Bubaloo, I'm going to America tomorrow. But only for a visit. I wish I could take you with me, but it's not that easy. You will need a passport, a visa, a plane ticket, some pocket

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money, and most importantly, a place to stay. Besides, who will help *Itay*?”

That night *Kalabaw* hardly slept, wondering where he could get a passport, a visa, a plane ticket, some pocket money, and a place to stay! At dawn, the next day, the neighbor's *jeepney* roared through the yard, startling him to his feet. The cousins, carrying suitcases, charged out of the house, followed by some of the family. All of them piled into the vehicle.

*Kalabaw* ran after it as never before. He was gasping for breath when he finally made it to the ferry landing. The cousins were already aboard the passenger/cargo ship bound for Manila, waving goodbye. Preoccupied with catching *Ligaya*'s attention, *Kalabaw* failed to see the procession of livestock marching up behind him. He was pushed up the gangplank into the boat and there he was penned in for the rest of the night. Crashing waves, mooing cows, and snorting pigs kept him awake. There was also this terrible *amoy* that annoyed him. Where was *Ligaya* and her cousin?

The next day, while waiting for the cows and pigs to get off, he spotted the cousins already crossing the street. He hurried after them. A bus rattling by blocked his path. Other vehicles followed and not one would let him through. When the street finally cleared, the cousins had disappeared.

*Kalabaw* found himself in the middle of an endless line of people. To his delight, among them were *Ligaya* and her cousin. But before he could even take a step toward them, the line broke up. People started rushing into the building. When the pandemonium died down, the cousins were nowhere in sight.

He was squeezed between a man who wore a white jacket and carried a *black* leather bag, and a man who had dark glasses on and carried a white cane. *Kalabaw* began to feel nervous when the man in the white jacket kept staring at him.

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*Bakit kaya?* What had he done?

After fidgeting for some time, the man took off his jacket and flung it over *Kalabaw*'s broad back. Then he hung his black bag on the carabao's right horn.

*“Kaibigan,”* he said, before darting through a door with the letters *M-E-N* on it, *“please keep these things for me. I-I can't wait.”*

Above the tumult, every few minutes a voice called, “Next!”

“Next!” called the voice again.

“Go, boy!” the man with dark glasses bellowed, poking him twice with his white cane.

*Kalabaw wondered what was taking the man who couldn't wait so long!*

*“Next!”* now the voice boomed with impatience.

“Get going—you're holding everyone up!” one shouted, then another, and soon the whole room was shouting.

*Kalabaw* shook. Everywhere he looked, eyes glared at him. What was he to do? He started wobbling his way in the direction of where *the man who couldn't wait* went, but all of a sudden, someone yanked on his tail.

*Kalabaw* screamed, “*ARAY!*”

The cry of pain startled everyone in the embassy to silence.

“Sorry, *kababayan,*” said the man who had just grabbed his *buntot*. “The consul's the opposite door!”

The place exploded with *halakhakan*.

To *Kalabaw*'s horror, he was pushed into a room with papers stacked on the floor, on the chairs, and on top of cabinets. And as if that wasn't enough, the man behind the desk, who was too busy to look up, said, “Your documents, please.”

He figured it must be the papers in the man's jacket pocket. He handed it over and it was instantly stamped with hardly a glance. He tried to explain his predicament, but the man with tired eyes and red cheeks was already mumbling words for him to repeat. Then something was flung in his direction which he barely caught with his teeth.

“*Next!*”

He returned to the waiting area more discombobulated than ever. Where was *the man who couldn't wait*? Where was Ligaya? He was about to enter the door with the letters M-E-N on it, when someone grabbed his right front leg and asked,

“Doc, do you have some smelling salts in that bag? My sister fainted in the heat.”

*Kalabaw* looked down. The lady kneeling on the floor, who had just talked to him, had already found something in the black bag which she quickly put under her sister's nose.

After a couple of snorts, the sister was up. “Thanks, Doc,” she said. “You saved the day.”

Two pairs of eyes now gazed at him adoringly—one pair was as blue as the Palawan sky and the other as green as rice shoots. Suddenly, *Kalabaw* was self-conscious about his looks. He wished he had Kiko's *salakot* on to cover his crescent-shaped horns. He wished his face wasn't so long, and his nose wasn't so big, and his lips weren't so thick. He wished his eyes weren't so wide apart. He wished....

“I'm Hope,” the lady with green eyes said. “She's Grace.”

Grace grabbed a chocolate bar out of her purse which she gladly gave to *Kalabaw*. Licking his chops, *Kalabaw* dropped the brown envelope which he had been carrying between his teeth. His mouth had become so dry. What a relief! While he munched on the candy, relishing every bite, Hope picked up the envelope.

“This your visa?” she asked. “Mind if I look at it?”

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“You’re immigrating to America! We’re from Texas. Do you have a place to stay? If you don’t, you can stay with us. We have a ranch back home.”

Overwhelmed, *Kalabaw* lost track of who had said what.

Grace found something in the jacket. “Look at this, sis—he’s flying on the same plane. Destination Dallas/Fort Worth ... woohoo!”

“Let’s go, or we’ll miss it.” Hope waved at a yellow cab whizzing by.

Gaping at *Kalabaw*, the taxi driver grunted. “No way. *Masyadong mabigat.*”

*Kalabaw*’s heart dropped—somehow, he wanted to be with the ladies. Grace pulled something green from her purse and gave it to the driver, who quickly accepted it.

Soon *Kalabaw* was being tied to the taxi’s roof.

As the cab raced through Manila, lying on his side, from horns to hoofs, all one thousand pounds of *Kalabaw* shook. He was never this frightened—no, not even when typhoons flooded the rice fields. At last, the taxi screeched to a halt. Miraculously, *Kalabaw* was back on all fours. It hurt when he walked, but he was thankful that he made it into a crate with all his body parts still intact. Whew!

“Stay put,” whispered the ladies. “You’ll be okay.”

Grace gave the porter, who had just misplaced his glasses, their papers. He stamped the papers and then said, squinting at *Kalabaw*, “Are you taking that mount with you?”

The sisters nodded.

“Wow! *Mukhang totoong totoo!*” the porter exclaimed. “Ladies, have you ever seen a live one?”

“Yes, sir!” said the ladies at the same time, both winking at Doc.

“I once had a carabao before I moved to Manila. He lived a good twenty years and served

me faithfully to the end,” said the porter, tearing up. “I still miss him. I thank God for making carabaos. They have no equal.”

“He’s gorgeous,” Grace said, glancing at Doc again.

And if carabaos could blush, *Kalabaw* would have.

“A breathing masterpiece,” Hope added. “A living work of art. Sis and I just love him.”

“Shhh,” Grace whispered. “The man thinks Doc’s a mount.”

All of a sudden someone said, “Look! Isn’t that your *kalabaw*?”

*Kalabaw* froze. He tried to blink but couldn’t. There was no mistaking that high-pitched, irritating, scratchy, obnoxious, he-hoped-he’d-never-ever-again-hear voice. He looked up and sure enough, not far away stood the *Buwisit!* And beside her was Ligaya. Dear Ligaya.

“Impossible.” Ligaya chuckled, not bothering to look. “Bubaloo is at home.”

Hearing her voice, *Kalabaw* suddenly felt guilty. Why, he hadn’t thought about Ligaya since meeting the two ladies! Should he make himself known? Through a series of events beyond his control, he found himself here at the airport with the two American ladies. He loved Kiko and his family with all his heart, but he also was eager and excited to go with Hope and Grace to this place called Texas. Besides, he hated to admit, he wanted more of that dark, sweet stuff.

“You didn’t even look—I tell you it’s your *kalabaw*.”

Again, Ligaya chuckled. “Cousin, that’s crazy.”

“I know it’s him. Because every time that beast of yours looks at me—I feel that he is mad at me—you know, *mukhang galit siya sa akin!*”

“Cousin, it’s your conscience bothering you,” Ligaya said, laughing. “Admit it. You were so mean to my Bubaloo.”

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“Believe me, it’s your beast—the chocolate thief,” the cousin said, getting closer and closer to *Kalabaw*, with Ligaya following.

*Kalabaw* held his breath, keeping his gaze on Ligaya’s face as she walked towards him. Remembering all her family’s past kindnesses to him, *Kalabaw* decided then and there, that he would tell Ligaya that he was indeed her Bubaloo. But before their eyes met, the porter wheeled him away. He ended up in the plane’s cargo hold where he spent the loneliest and most uncomfortable hours of his life.

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*Kalabaw* has the run of the sisters’ ranch, and he practically owns their hearts. He also has become a celebrity of sort. Children from all over the county come to the ranch to see him, asking for rides and also taking pictures with him. *Kalabaw* is only too glad to comply. He’s been saving the money from the rides to buy Kiko a tractor. He hopes it will make up for his absence.

Now and then he still thinks about *the man who couldn’t wait*. Did he ever get out of that door? He still hopes someday to return the jacket and the bag.

Any given day, if you see an animal with a pair of sickle-shaped horns, out on an East Texas ranch, among horses and cows, munching on chocolate bars, that’s *Bubalus bubalis*, aka Asian Water Buffalo, Carabao, *Kalabaw*, Bubaloo, Chocolate Thief, and of course, “Doc.”

He is probably dreaming of a certain rice field in a precious island called Palawan, where a good hardworking rice farmer and his family live.

